

Discerning True and False Christianity

During the last ten years various currency changes in Sudan have caused some confusion for people. Which banknotes are valid and which are not? Which pounds? Which dinars? and which SDG? The confusion could offer opportunity for criminals to make a profit. Some might print fake money and put it into circulation in order to increase their own wealth. The false money would be made to look as close as possible like real money. Only a foolish criminal would print their own SDG 6.00 note because there isn't a genuine SDG 6.00! Everyone would immediately know it was a fake. A clever criminal would print a SDG 5.00 note using the right colours, correct size, exact wording with its thickness of paper as close to the real note as possible.

The most dangerous false Christianity will never be very different from true Christianity. The closer it is to the truth, the more difficult it is for Christians to discern it. Our Lord Jesus warned His disciples that even the elect could be deceived by false Christs, false prophets, false great signs and false miracles, Matthew 24:24. We are to "watch out" and to "be on guard" against deceivers, Mark 13:5, 22-23. Like a soldier who keeps a sharp-eyed look out at his guard post, so must we expect false Christianity and then defend ourselves against it.

The "elect" in Matthew 24:22-24¹, who may be deceived, are those people who are chosen by God's grace before the foundation of the world. They are chosen to become Christians, Ephesians 1:3-4; Romans 8:28-30. The Greek word is made up of two others – *ek* from, and *lego* to pick out and gather up. Jesus' theme in these two Gospel chapters is to teach His followers we are to anticipate some false Christian workers being among the true ones. Jesus tells us so we will learn ahead of time how to distinguish between the true and the false.

One important key from these Bible passages is to examine the place of miracles and signs in a ministry. Jesus Himself would not use signs and miracles merely to win converts or disciples, see Matthew 4:1-11; 12:15-21; 12:39; 16:1-4; 27:39-51. The Bible shows how

¹ and in Mark 13:20-23.

miracles and signs can be performed by “secret arts” and by “false prophets “, Exodus 7:12; 7:22; 8:7; Deuteronomy 13:1-5; 2 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Peter 2:1; Revelation 13:3; 19:20. *God does do miraculous things*, but not all miracles are from God. Spurious “miracles” are often linked with false teaching – teaching that is not far from the truth, teaching that is Christian-sounding, teaching that is Bible-quoting, but teaching that is false. It is nearly, but not quite Christian!

There are parts of Sudan which are dangerous for people to walk in because of unexploded mines left from years of conflicts. Hopefully the United Nations and other mine clearing agencies have identified most of these areas and are working at clearing them up. A close Sudanese friend of mine works with the U.N. department. I have seen some of the “danger” signs put up. The warning Jesus gives about false “Christian” teachers is God’s way to protect His chosen followers. God knows if we go that way we will be in trouble. Because we are forewarned we can be forearmed. Only those who foolishly ignore God’s warnings will be deceived.

“A significant difference between false messiahs and the true Messiah in this gospel is the way the others show off their signs and miracles, Mark 13:21-22. They need people to be impressed by that because they have nothing else to offer. By contrast, Jesus is restrained, not from performing signs and wonders as the need of the people reaches Him, but from using these to impose or compel faith. It isn’t fundamentally what His good news is about, though these signs and wonders are signposts to the good news. Jesus embodies the good news, and His death and resurrection are to be the heart of it. That is their gold in the bank, giving meaning to the notes and coins of signs and wonders. The false messiahs have only counterfeit money, impressive, but with nothing to back it up”.²

We need not doubt that most of these people are sincere in what they are doing and they firmly believe that they are serving God. But we must notice that Jesus Himself warned us about self-deception! In the Sermon on the Mount He warns, “Watch out for false prophets”,

² Donald English [The Message of Mark](#) Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press) 1992, p.207-208.

Matthew 7:15. Jesus uses fruit trees as an example. It is as if He said, "You only get good mangoes from mango trees, good lemons from lemon trees, and good bananas from banana trees. You don't get the right fruit from the wrong tree". From verse 21 Jesus focuses on false teachers who are themselves deceived. He says, "Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me you evildoers"". Read these next two sentences carefully! Salvation – our entry into heaven – does not depend on us knowing Jesus. The crucial question is, does the Lord Jesus Christ know us?

Speaking the name of Jesus is not enough to show genuine Christianity. The life of Jesus must be lived.³ Expressing orthodoxy in words is not enough to reveal genuine Christianity. The works of Jesus must be shown in everyday life. "Whoever claims to live in him (Jesus) must walk as Jesus walked", 1 John 2:6. Jesus quietly got on with God the Father's work, day after day. Calling Jesus "Lord, Lord," without submitting to His Lordship in daily life, is a sign of impending exclusion from heaven. Orthodox words must be reinforced by obedience in life. Jesus called the false prophets: "evildoers", not "evil speakers", Matthew 7:21-23.

- **We can recognise the true prophet** by certain qualities in his or her life: being part of a true flock of gentle sheep; producing consistently good, lasting, sweet fruit to sustain others; steadily and largely silently doing God's will – and doing it well.
- **We can recognise the false prophet** by different qualities in his or her life: hurting and damaging the flock even while appearing to be part of it; producing consistently bad fruit which lets down, dissatisfies, poisons or corrupts others; loudly talking about God and His will, but doing very little of long-term value.⁴

³ John Stott Christian Counter-Culture Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press) 1978, p.206-208.

⁴ David L. Turner The Gospel of Matthew Cornerstone Biblical Commentary (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House) 2005, p.117-121.

It is a sobering challenge to us all that Jesus does not accept our words of worship unless He sees and knows our works of worship. The entire Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' standard by which He expects His Christians to live.⁵

Notice in Revelation 13:3 "the whole world was astonished and followed" the beast who miraculously recovered from an apparently fatal wound. (The beast and his false prophets were later judged by God, Revelation 19:20). I learn from this that someone who comes to Sudan with an International reputation as a Christian *could* still be a self-deceived false teacher and spurious miracle worker! It is not what the world thinks about a person that really counts. It is what God thinks that matters. It is worth making enquiries with trusted people who live in the person's country of origin (but are not in the person's organisation) before agreeing to arrange things for, or accept help from, any overseas Christian visitor to Sudan.

Under British and Sudanese law any suspect for a crime is "innocent until they are proven guilty". As a Christian, when it comes to discerning false teachers around the Christian church, I have always followed the opposite rule, "Guilty until proven innocent". As a pastor with responsibility to protect my flock I feel this is the way to be responsible, Acts 20:25-31.

The Old Testament warns us about false teachers:

- Jeremiah 23:1-4, shepherds who destroy, scatter and do not care for the flocks of God's people.
Jeremiah 25:32-38, these same shepherds are judged by God.
- Ezekiel 34:1-31, shepherds who live in luxury themselves while their people suffer. They do not pastorally care for believers or evangelise the unbelievers. God will hold them accountable, verse 10.
- Zechariah 11:4-17, God sometimes sends us false teachers as a judgement on our continuing refusal to live by the disciplines of Christian truth.
- Deuteronomy 13:1-5, false prophets and miracle workers who lead into idolatry. We are told that God sends these false people to test the reality of our love for Him, verse

⁵ Matthew chapters 5-7.

3. Do we love God for Himself or only for His blessings? Over 38 years of Christian ministry I have observed how many false teachers offer things which appeal to the flesh of the Christian – healing, wealth and prosperity, freedom from bondage and relief from poverty. By contrast, Jesus called His disciples to crucify their flesh, to take up their crosses and to follow their Master, Matthew 16:21-28. We must keep in mind the things of God and not the worldly things of worldly men.

- Deuteronomy 18:14-22, sorcery and divination are not permitted to the people of God. Some will claim to speak words in God’s name using methods which God has forbidden. They must be discerned and dismissed.

The New Testament also warns us about false teachers:

Matthew 7:15-23. It may be significant that this warning by Jesus follows the choice every Christian must make, verses 13-14. The difficult path forward is usually the right path to take. We can decide to go the easy way or live the way of the cross. We can discern false Christian workers *by the fruit that they offer to us* as well as by the fruit they produce. If everything they offer is easy – beware!

Matthew 24:4-24. Verse 11 warns of “many” false prophets who will “deceive many” people. Big crowds of people flocking to see and hear someone do not mean that that person is automatically a true Christian Ambassador for Jesus Christ. To deceive is “to trick someone by behaving in a dishonest way” and “to make someone believe something that is not true”.⁶ The Greek word means “to deceive by leading into error, to seduce”.⁷ (for the rest of the passage see above).

Acts 20:28-31, where people arise from within the church. Influenced by outside teachings they “distort the truth” – an interesting phrase – to gain followers they can lead. I discern here a lesson that the emphasis is not on huge error but on little and subtle changes to certain Christian truths. Whenever we look in a mirror we see ourselves. We take for granted what we see is ourselves. But is it really? No it isn’t! What we see is a mirror-image of ourselves,

⁶ Macmillan School Dictionary (Oxford: Macmillan Education) 2004.

⁷ W.E. Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson) 1996 edition.

which is ourselves in reverse! It is nearly true, but not quite. A distortion contains everything that it should contain to be true, but it puts the wrong emphasis on certain parts and so presents a false picture. So much false “Christian” teaching is like this. People say to me, “I cannot fault the truth in what so and so is saying”. I reply, “The truth is all there. But the whole thing is out of balance”. Consequently it offers the wrong perspective on the right truth.

2 Corinthians 11:1-15. There is a Jesus who is *not* the Jesus Paul preached, verse 4. This false Jesus promises no suffering and all associated ministry is done from a position of strength. This false Jesus has false prophets who live to a respectably wealthy standard and they boast high professional qualifications by the standards of this world. Compare this to Paul’s own letter of recommendation to people who doubted him, which he feels forced into writing although he does not want to, 2 Corinthians 11:16-12:13. Paul’s suffering authenticated his ministry. Of course, the false Jesus does not really exist! But because there are plenty of people who wish he did they are quite willing to follow someone who teaches them to believe deceiving things.

2 Corinthians 11:26 some people can be deceived so much that they threaten to physically harm those who do not go along with their teaching. Using the world’s ways to pressurise Christians into believing something is a sure sign of a false “man of God”.

It is interesting that 2 Corinthians 11:13-15 refer back to Genesis 3:1-20 where Satan himself comes to Eve, and slightly misquotes and over-emphasises the Word of God. Satan appeals to Eve’s (and later Adam’s) fleshly desires. “Take what you desire”. By implication, “Do *not* take up your cross”. Satan does it again in Matthew 4:1-11. He tries to trip up Jesus and to stop Him going to the cross and making atonement for the sins of the world. He challenges the divinity of Jesus. He suggests Jesus dramatically shows divine power in a spectacular way, and Satan quotes Scripture to support his view! He offers what rightly belongs to Jesus – but suggests Jesus gets to obtain it the wrong way.

Galatians 2:4 uncovers “false brothers” who tried to add the physical rite of circumcision to the gospel of Jesus Christ, verses 3-5. Some false teachers today preach a true gospel but add on to it something that does not need to be there. Paul describes this well in Galatians 1:6-7: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a *different gospel* – which is really no gospel at all” (emphasis mine). Legalism and rules surrounding experiences that false “Christians” say *must* be observed are not the true and free gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The whole of Galatians chapters 2 and 3 warn us how even well-known church leaders can be deluded, see 2:11 for Peter, and 2:13 for Barnabas. Many people from the churches of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe and elsewhere in Galatia were gullibly accepting teachers who sounded good, but who Paul says were “false brothers” . This second interesting phrase indicates these people were saved (hence they were “brothers”), but by adding extras to the gospel they were no longer preaching and teaching the truth (hence “*false* brothers”), 2:4.⁸ The true Christian gospel is this: “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ”, Galatians 3:26-27. When anyone realises they cannot make themselves right with God and so throws themselves into the arms of Jesus Christ, exercising personal faith that Jesus will transform them to be ready for heaven, at that moment they are born again into a genuine Christian life. They become true Christians, that is, Christians not in words only, but Christlike in life’s values and Christlike in lifestyles.⁹

2 Timothy 3:1-17 draws two clear distinctions between false and true teachings and teachers. The false people have “a form of godliness”, verse 5. They appear good living and they use good words. They are however “evil men and impostors” who deceive others and are themselves sincerely deceived, verse 13. An impostor is someone who pretends to be someone else, someone who deceives others by false identity.¹⁰ We may say such people are two-faced. The false teachings appeal to the selfish desires of human nature, verses 2-4. Those who do not exercise self-control and personal choice in accordance with the cross of Christ will be easily influenced and made to fall away from following Christ, verses 6-7. A

⁸ Also in 2 Corinthians 11:26 The Greek is *pseudadelphos*.

⁹ See John 3:3-6; 2 Corinthians 5:17-18; 1 John 5:11-12.

¹⁰ Macmillan School Dictionary (Oxford: Macmillan Education) 2004 and English Dictionary (Glasgow: Harper Collins) 1995.

working knowledge of the Scriptures together with a saving relationship to the Christ of whom the Scriptures speak is the perfect defence against being led astray.

A Summary of Ways to Discern the True from the False

In Bahri market one day I was trying to buy a saucepan for my wife Brenda to use in cooking at home. There were several cheap makes available from south-east Asian or East European countries, or there was a more expensive one from Germany. I bought the German cook pot. When I got it home Brenda noticed that it wasn't German at all! The box said, in very small print, "MADE for GERMANY". In the semi-darkness of the suuk I had seen the word "Germany" and I assumed the pan was made IN Germany – which would be an excellent standard, well worth paying a bit more money for. But I was tricked by some clever, deceitful marketing! It cost me a few Sudanese dinars. Be warned though: being deceived by false "Christian" teaching and teachers will cost anyone much more than money.

1. **Personally listen to your Saviour, Jesus Christ.** John 10:1-18 teaches that real Christians will recognise the voice of their Saviour, verses 3-5. We must listen to Him speaking. The Bible is His word. Converse with Jesus in regular, daily reading, thinking and praying. Love to be with Him and learn how to love Him.
2. **Personally know your Saviour, Jesus Christ.** Verses 4 and 14 use the phrases "they know his voice" and "my sheep know me". If you know someone you are familiar with them. You understand information about them. You remember what pleases them and what upsets them. Your relationship with the person helps you realise what they approve of. It is a good idea for us to check what is going on in special meetings by what we think Jesus would be doing. Get to know your Lord Jesus Christ through the Scriptures – especially the gospels – and then you can recognise Christlikeness (or otherwise) in what is happening.
3. **Personally understand and enjoy the Truth of Jesus Christ.** Colossians chapters 1 and 2 focus on the One who is, "the image of the invisible God", 1:15. Jesus is supreme in everything, 1:18. His body and blood alone redeem us and reconcile us to God, 1:21-23. Ongoing faith, outwardly expressed in good works, is the only visible

sign of being saved. True servants of Christ may well suffer in their service as Paul did, 1:24-2:1. “In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority”, 2:9-10. No Christian needs anything more than a living relationship with Jesus Christ – whatever anybody else tells them. Jesus Christ commands the respect of all other worldly powers. Verse 8 points out that there are those who are trying to make free Christians into prisoners, making folk slaves to beliefs and practices which are deceitful – usually promising much but giving very little!

4. **Keep Your Eyes on How God is Being Glorified.** John 9:1-41 includes Jesus’ comment that disability from birth may happen “so that the work of God may be displayed” in a person’s life, verse 3. In the narrative, Jesus goes on to heal the man born blind. *There is no doubt God can be glorified in a miraculous healing.* He should also be glorified more often than He is for the ways God made our human bodies with capacities to self-heal and to respond to discovered medicines and treatment, Psalm 139:13-16. My own experience has deepened my personal understanding of how sufferings and hardships can be accepted and lived through for the glory of God. I was a Christian preacher for about 36 years. In November 2006 God took back the voice He entrusted me with since birth. Aggressive cancer in my voice box meant that I had only two months to live unless the voice-box was removed. I believe God is glorified now as I, admittedly falteringly, live to serve Him and the Sudanese church, by writing and otherwise encouraging believers. My Lord Jesus is well worth serving *even when the way I have to live is not the way I would personally choose.* “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain”, Philippians 1:21. This undoubtedly miracle working God is also “the God of all comfort”, 2 Corinthians 1:3.
5. **Watch for Gentle Restoration.** Galatians 6:1 teaches how Christians should respond to those who are trapped in the sin of false Christianity. Having described the life-products of mere human nature and contrasted them with those the Holy Spirit brings to the fore of every true believer,¹¹ Paul encourages a burden-sharing standing

¹¹ Galatians 5:16-26.

alongside of those who have fallen. There is no harsh dismissiveness.¹² Just as God does not want anyone to perish, neither does the true Christian.¹³ There is no given sense of “We are better than you”, nor the condemnation, “You have failed”. Instead there is a quiet growth in beautifully attractive Christian grace. The good spiritual seeds of Scripture are well understood and applied. Gradually over time, crops of true Christian living bear the undeniable witness that God really is (and has been) at work.

Discussion guide

Using this chapter and Scriptures quoted:

1. Share examples of when you have been concerned about “Christian” activities, times when you have wondered if what is said – or what is happening – is really Christian.
(Jesus warned three times in Matthew 24:23-27, “Do not believe it”, “Do not follow”).
2. Explain what you think Jesus means by, “Watch out that no one deceives you”, Mark 13:5, and “be on your guard”, Mark 13:22-23.
3. Is it true or is it false to say that *a miracle*¹⁴ *is a work of God*?
Give reasons for your answer. Use Scripture to validate your argument.
4. Acts 20:25-31 teach a pastor’s duty to discern visiting people and upcoming leaders. The flock must be protected from “false Christian teaching and practice”.
What guidelines would you set to help a local church pastor in discerning the helpful from the dangerous “Christian” worker?
Justify your answer from Scripture.
5. “God sometimes sends us false teachers as a judgement”.
Comment on this statement and the implications it has for Christians.
6. Noticing how many false blessings are offered to the benefit of a person’s earthly (fleshly) life, explain what Jesus meant by, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”. See Matthew 16:21-28.
How does this understanding help us to discern true from false?

¹² Galatians 6:1-5.

¹³ 2 Peter 3:9.

¹⁴ “Miracle” “an event that is contrary to the established laws of nature and attributed to a supernatural cause”, English Dictionary (Glasgow: Harper Collins) 1995.

“Miracle” Greek *dunamis*, “power, inherent ability – used of works of a supernatural origin and character, such as could not be produced by natural agents or means”, W.E. Vine Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament words (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson) 1996.

7. Explain how people can be “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power”, 2 Timothy 3:4-5.

Why does Paul say, “Have nothing to do with them”?

8. I have listed five ways to discern the true from the false. Which do you think is the most important? Why?

Are there any ways to discern that you would add to this list?

In sharing these ways, use Scripture to justify their use.